

IT WAS WRITTEN ALL OVER HIM: CLASSROOM TEACHERS' REFERRAL CRITERIA FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

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A contextual understanding of general education classroom teachers' reasons for a student's referral for special education services provides insight into this initial step in the identification process. The philosophy of social constructivism (Bruner, 1987; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978) provides a backdrop for the underlying practices and beliefs which render the participants in this study to employ the referral criteria that they use. Thirteen general education elementary teachers in a suburban city in southern Ontario were interviewed about their referral criteria for special education services. The results of this study indicated a combination of student characteristics that teachers observed (inattention, lack of comprehension, inability to complete tasks in the allotted time, and poor test performance) and what teachers inferred (e.g., about the way a student looks). The implications of the research for classroom and special education practices in particular are discussed.

Context of the Study

The Issue

In the early 1990's, the education system in Ontario, Canada, appeared to be headed for crisis. Students were not performing well on international tests. (Brown, 2000; *News Release: Higher education standards are putting kids first*, 2001). The Royal Commission on Learning (1995) investigated the state of the province's educational system. In public meetings, a common complaint heard by commissioners was that the educational system had lost a sense of accountability; schools had lost focus on providing a quality education for children in training them for the future.

To address these issues, curriculum standards for each subject and grade level were revised and yearly standardized tests were to be administered in the future to track students' progress over time (Curriculum Documents, 1998; Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2005). As a teacher at Ridgefield Elementary at the time, I recall how these changes in policy commanded the attention of educators. These reforms in assessment and instruction required teachers to change their classroom curriculum and practices. Teachers began using curriculum standard methodology in planning units, creating tests, and defining student progress. At one point, a curriculum management committee was created for staff to consider issues and strategies that could help facilitate students' academic performance at the school. This process provoked everyone's perspective to change in terms of defining student ability or inability—and therefore, students' possible need for special education services.

This study seeks to determine which criteria classroom teachers use to determine which students should be referred for special education services. The changes in curriculum content and implementation of standardized testing could indicate different referral themes relative to past research. A study of this topic at my school serves as a means to explore these issues.

Setting

Ridgefield Elementary was located in Pineville, a large city (population: 613, 000) in southern Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2002). Forty-four percent of Pineville's population had a first language other than English. The community had a definite transient component to its population; thirty-six percent of the population had moved to into the area within the last five

years. Pineville's average yearly income was about \$37, 000. Eleven percent of the population aged 20-34 had attained less than a high school graduation certificate as compared to 14.4 percent for those ages 35-44 and 23.3 percent for those aged 45-64.

During the course of this research study, Ridgefield Elementary had a student population of about 500 students, kindergarten to eighth grade (School Information, 2004). Many of the students were first-generation Canadians; although many could speak English fluently, other languages were spoken at home such as Italian, Tagalog, Portuguese, and Mandarin/Cantonese. The families in the school community were middle to upper-middle income earners. Students were well dressed and had their basic living needs met. Most fathers and mothers worked outside the home.

I was one of three special education teachers at the school for eight of my eleven years of teaching. As a special education consultant teacher in inclusion classrooms, I worked with groups of students from approximately ten general education classrooms each year. Sometimes I assisted students in their classroom; however, most of the time, they met me in a resource room where we reviewed concepts/topics presented in class, edited their writing, and administered modified spelling tests. Having worked with students identified with disabilities for eight years, I had the opportunity to get to know the classroom teacher participants in this study through a variety of professional experiences. In discussions with classroom teachers about student characteristics, intervention plans, attendance at conferences, and other educational initiatives in the area, we developed a professional rapport that facilitated their feeling comfortable in discussing special education issues with me.

Mark: An Illustration of a Student receiving Special Education Services

At 11:30 a.m., Mark was once again the last to arrive in the remedial special education room to join four others for a modified eighth-grade math program. He had been referred about five years ago due to difficulties with inattention, hyperactivity, incomplete tasks and assignments. Classroom teachers felt frustrated by his inability to conform to the classroom routines and expectations. Mark's classmates in this math remedial workgroup shared some of his characteristics, but not all; they were included in the group due to an underlying inability to attain success with their age-appropriate grade level classroom practices/activities.

As I modeled a math strategy, Mark would stare off into space one second; play with his pencil the next. Only when he was made accountable to each step in the activity as I did it with him, that his ability to focus improved. However, this too proved elusive, as he could be easily distracted by making a comment or posing a question about some non-related event. It's not that Mark was necessarily intending to avoid doing his work; it appeared that his mind simply floated freely from one idea to another non-related idea. The other four students had academic difficulties, but they could complete the activities after teacher modeling and guided examples were provided. Mark was more challenging in this sense. He needed a lot of direct instruction. It was my reflections about this session with Mark that led me to research classroom teachers' referral criteria.

Officially classifying a Student with a Disability

Every few months, meetings were held to officially label students with a disability. Students who had been referred for special education services within the past three years would be officially identified as having an exceptionality based on a series of assessment results completed by myself, the classroom teacher, and other para-educators either housed in the school or those in private practice. As I prepared the room for the officials from the school district who would compose the committee for formal identification, parents/guardians, and other invited guests, I reflected on how this milestone was first initiated for students such as Mark. What was that initial moment when the idea of referral for special education services

gelled in the classroom teacher's mind? What did the student do (or not do) that provoked this need to be referred? Was it one particular event or a conclusion resulting from a series of activities/observations over time? Did the parent/guardian comment on something that initiated the prospect for referral? As I sat in the special education room knowing that soon it would be transformed into a type of confirmation hearing to classify children as exceptional, I wanted to go back in time and ask the classroom teachers involved how the idea of special education referral for each of the students to be officially identified had started.

Role of a Special Education Consultant Teacher in Inclusion Classrooms

In my role as a special education consultant teacher in inclusion classrooms, I assisted children who demonstrated academic abilities two years or more below their age-appropriate grade level. Some students with severe physical disabilities faced real challenges in daily living functions and, therefore, required an aide to assist them with all daily activities. However, most of the students I assisted had a mild disability (i.e., learning disability, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.). They appeared to have knowledge but had difficulty demonstrating it in the classroom as expected by the teacher/curriculum. When students began to exhibit signs of being at risk in the classroom, the teacher would discuss the student's profile with me to seek a means to investigate the causes of the difficulty. Many times, this would involve my administering the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement (Mather & Woodcock, 2001) and the Spache Reading Tests (Spache, 1981) to see what the levels of academic performance would be for a particular child.

The tests/tools I chose to use had a great influence in ascertaining the level of academic abilities of students referred to me. For example, did the diagnostic tool include a balance of visual and text activities or a different number of either? If a student was a visual learner, he/she would do better on a visual diagnostic test than on a text-based assessment. The standardized assessments I chose, with all of their biases, had a large impact on how the school came to view this student.

Referral Reasons based on My Experience

Given this context, I noticed that students could be considered for special education services either due to simple academic inability (i.e., severely below grade level in reading/writing skills) or attitude (i.e., not wanting to do their work, an apparent fear in attempting to do a task). In certain cases, differentiating one from the other can be a very difficult task. What a classroom teacher views as inability may not be inability at all. The student might have chosen not to do the defined tasks because of a bad attitude, poor work ethic, or emotional stress related to the home or family environment. Another possibility could be ineffective employment of strategies to address the student's learning strengths, expectation to do a task too early in the students' academic developmental program, or insufficient modeling.

A premise of the educational system is that it has been constructed into its current form through choices made by administrative authorities over time (Fu, 1995). All educators are involved in this process, and I am no exception. Classroom teachers choose the learning styles to be used in delivering the curriculum. The issue of curriculum programs is certainly a part of this process. When a teacher uses a given program as the basis of a unit of study, the teacher and students become subject to the biases and teaching/learning styles involved. If a different program had been employed, a student seen as needing referral for special education services might not have been viewed this way at all. These issues illustrate how students come to be defined by the manner in which schools construct education.

Social Constructivism and the Referral of Students for Special Education Services

Often, people are either considered to be smart or dumb, good or bad. These perceived characteristics come to define us through the perceptions of others in terms of these supposed traits. It is commonly believed that even though we can be influenced by environmental factors, we have basic identities apart from context or a situation (Dudley-Marling, 2004). However, this concept of personal traits residing within the person is problematic. Because the identity of a person is defined within a web of social relationships and interactions, the idea that personal characteristics are solely within a person misrepresents life (Gergen, 1990; Quantz & O'Connor, 1988). Freedman & Combs (1996) illustrate the social constructivist view in terms of how our identity is an ongoing interchange as we interact with others: *The self continually creates itself through narratives that include other people who are reciprocally woven into these narratives. . . . This conception of self is at odds with the skin-bound container with fixed contents (resources)* (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 17). It is through a person's interaction with others that they come to be defined in comparison with peers.

The identity of being intelligent requires that the school environment practice cultural standards that define a student as smart: high grades on tests, insightful questions/answers mentioned in class, mature behavior, and proficient English skills. Conversely, the idea of being smart provokes the issue of others not being as smart: low grades on tests, does not participate, unacceptable behavior, incomplete work. A third and central issue in the concept of personal identities is the role of an authority to adjudicate smartness/dumbness: the teacher, peers, creators of standardized assessments (Dudley-Marling, 2004). The type of tasks, personalities involved, choice of learning format (auditory versus visual, for example), length of time to process presented information, among other things, can greatly influence whether a person is considered at the end of the day to be smart. In essence, the idea that a student should be referred for special education services is not something that is defined by the student alone; all of the contextual variables interact together in this process.

Examples of Referral Criteria for Special Education Services

This study explores the thinking of classroom teachers as they consider referring a student for special education services. Specifically, the prime research question is: how do classroom teachers determine which students they believe to be in need of special education services and subsequently should be referred? Classroom teachers are expected to teach and assess a wide range of curriculum standards (Curriculum Expectations: Grades 1-8, 1998). With twenty, thirty, or more students in a classroom, teachers are to schedule into each day a variety of subject topics and activities to cover the expected curriculum areas. Teachers must address many curriculum standards in a school year, which can result in some students feeling overwhelmed (Abidin & Robinson, 2002).

There is a standard process in referring students for special education services. With any given curriculum standard, at least some students will inevitably be unable to achieve the desired learning outcomes. When teachers deliver instructions and lead classes through activities, they begin to notice those students who are having difficulty. It is through the teachers' *reading* of students' comportment and academic abilities that the consideration for special education referral begins; once referred, it is highly probable that the student will later be officially identified (Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Christenson, 1983). Therefore, a better understanding of classroom teachers' criteria for special education referral would help define the important initial step in the special education identification process.

Educators' Views of Referral Reasons for Special Education Services

Reasons for special education referral vary. Some researchers (Caram, 2001; Bucci & Reitzammer, 1992; Davis & McCaul, 1990; Limbos & Geva, 2001; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001) associate referral for special education services with disruptive behavior, unstable

homes, or having a first language other than English. Students may also be referred less obvious reasons: those who live in poverty (Evans, 1995; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001) or are quiet and withdrawn or suffer from peer rejection and hence often seem alone (Caram, 2001). Tunstall (1995) found that students referred for special education services are those who are seen as having low ability, low grades, an inability to read, truant behavior, an inability to function in a classroom with peers, and irregular contact with the school.

To explore the referral process used in schools, Kohler (2001) conducted a study with a group of teachers designed to explore longitudinal changes in their beliefs about students who are referred over time. She found that the teachers' concept of special education referral was fluid during the school year. While the teachers viewed the issue from a socio-cultural perspective at the beginning of the year, by the end of the year, their view was more focused on a student's ability to learn. The decision to refer students for special education was based on curriculum expectations and appropriate classroom conduct.

The teachers interviewed (Kohler, 2001) admitted that the concept of referral for special education services was situation-specific, with a student being viewed as needing assistance in one classroom but not another. Rather than reflect on student or teacher shortcomings relative to learning and teaching styles, those interviewed tended to lay initial blame for academic failure on the students' parents and home life for academic failure. Interestingly, Kohler comments that the teachers failed to see their own role in the creation of students needing referral in terms of the teachers' classroom expectations that affected the performance and behavior of students.

Cullen (2000) conducted a survey with fifty-five classroom teachers that relates to the direct role of the teacher in the identification of students referred for special education services. His conclusion was that teachers could accurately predict students who should be referred and would be later identified as students with an exceptionality once the official assessments have been completed. This reflects my own experience as a special education teacher. Teachers with whom I worked would only make a referral when there was an ongoing significant problem with performance in the classroom. There may be extenuating issues such as social skills or being a non-English speaker, but the central issue was that the student was not performing academically in the classroom.

Social Construction of Students Referred for Special Education Services

Researchers (Cullen & Shaw, 2000; Fu, 1995; Kohler, 2001) have commented on how society constructs school systems and categories that result in students being referred for special education services. Pallas (1989) provides an historical overview regarding definitions of students who are possibly eligible for special education referral. Thirty years ago, schools attributed students' difficulties with school to cultural deprivation; students were provided with preschool enrichment activities so as to instill in them middle-class culture. Next, educational deprivation was considered to be the lack of fit between poor, minority children and their schools. Subsequently, all students were considered to be in danger of academic failure because families, communities, churches, and work places did not help individuals achieve their full human potential.

More recently, the probability of academic failure and/or dropout of school have been operationalized by identifying subpopulations that are not as likely to perform; this is illustrated through programmatic initiatives such as early identification and intervention (Pallas, 1989). However, none of these definitions contain the comprehensive set of factors that compose the education of children. Schools are just one social institution amongst many that educate (or do not educate) students. Pallas discussed a possible relationship between

students who are referred and those who are educationally disadvantaged if exposed to inadequate or inappropriate educational experiences in the family, school, or community. Furthermore, he comments that this definition is intentionally vague; achieving agreement on how to define *appropriate and adequate* is impossible.

I see a possible relationship between a lack of appropriate and adequate experiences in the family, school or community and the need for special education referral. Schools expect that students arrive at school with certain out-of-school educational experiences which facilitate stimulation of thought and discussion. Parents reading to their children, family vacations to other communities, and visiting local museums are three examples (Right to Learn Report, 1985) that I have seen related to this concept. However, schools' preconceived academic standards and classroom practices define what is expected of students; these are more fundamental for success at school than just out-of-school experiences. However, in my experience at Ridgefield Elementary, students referred to me often had academic difficulty even with adequate out-of-school experiences.

In my experience as a special education teacher, referrals are made because of academic difficulty/failure, difficulty with oral and expressive English language skills, inattentiveness/lack of compliance with classroom routines, and improper interactions in social contexts. Fu (1995) discusses these issues in his book, *The Trouble is my English*, the story about the experiences his Vietnamese family had after moving to the United States. He found that the standard methods for the writing process did not provoke the students to demonstrate their full potential. Educational programs were designed to focus on *able* kindergarten to grade 12 students, leaving poor and minority children who do not seem to *fit* in their schools to be sent for remediation in a drill and skill type of approach. However, when Fu was offered the choice one day to create text related to a drawing that he had made, his written text became more personal and creative.

Survey of Educators' Views about Referral Reasons

Past research has documented the initiation of a student being referred by classroom teachers as a powerful predictor of subsequent special education placement (Thurlow, Christenson, & Ysseldyke, 1983; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Regan, & McGue, 1981; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1981). This emphasis on classroom teachers' predictions can be attributed to their wide scope of the educational domain. They are not limited to the confines of a particular standardized test or strategy. Rather, they can make a global and combined assessment of a student's cognitive, behavior, and social performance (Cullen & Shaw, 2000).

As I listened to classroom teachers presenting their compelling reasons for making the referrals, they and I were often frustrated that this was only half of the process for identification of a student as exceptional. In order for a student to be classified, the standardized assessment scores completed by the school psychologist or speech and language pathologist had to render a profile commensurate with an exceptionality category (e.g., learning disability). If this was not the case, the student would be considered as a slow learner and denied the services he/she needed. This perspective on teachers being initiators of the special education process and their accuracy in identification has significant implications for students. It is teachers and the education system itself over time that develops a system of learning and defines what acceptable student performance is. If a student cannot demonstrate ability in these predetermined ways, he/she will be seen as needing a referral for special services (Fu, 1995).

The identification process that follows the initial referral by the classroom teacher often invokes the involvement of para-educators outside the classroom. Based on psychologists' records, Hutton (1985) identified eight main classroom teacher reasons for referrals: poor peer

relationships, displays frustration, below academic expectations, shy and withdrawn behavior, disruptive behavior, fighting, refuses to work, and short attention span. Poor peer relationships was concluded as the number one referral reason for both sexes; fighting was most cited by early-elementary teachers. Other research (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Andrews, Wisniewski, & Mulick, 1997; Jackson, 2001; MacMillan & Siperstein, 2001; Mamlin & Harris, 1998) has investigated classroom teachers' referral reasons; there is a common element of "nonacademic developmental difficulties" in referring students for special education services: social-behavioral issues, inadequate home environment (Mamlin & Harris, 1998), height and weight relative to peers for students suspected of having developmental or behavioral problems (Andrews et al., 1997), ethnic background (Jackson, 2001), overlooking exclusionary clauses of exceptionality category criteria so as to attain services (MacMillan & Siperstein, 2001), and the stress a teacher experiences relative to a target student (Abidin & Robinson, 2002). This illustrates the issues that can be considered by classroom teachers in referring students which are beyond pure academic factors.

In my school, the school psychologist's assessment results determined if a student met the criteria to be identified as exceptional or not; teachers' observations and students' performance carried little weight in the final determination. Classroom teachers and I were frustrated with student cases where there was an obvious need but not the assessment results to justify formal identification. Contrary to the practices of my school district, Ysseldyke and Algozzine (1981) found that school identification committees gave such weight to referral reasons that they often overruled contradictory assessment data of school psychologists. At my school, a student's actual academic programming needs might have been met if this practice had been in place. This illustrates a further dimension of the irregularity of the identification process with the school district in this study; not only do students who need assistance have to illustrate need for referral for special education services (knowingly or unknowingly) to their classroom teacher, but they also need to demonstrate intelligence and academic achievement assessment results which *fit* predetermined exceptionality categories. If students *failed* at any of these steps in the process, their need for guaranteed special education services is denied; yet, their classroom performance indicated that they did need services.

So as to extend the research just discussed on referral reasons for special education services, this study illustrates the referral reasons of general education classroom teachers who have now implemented new curriculum standards (Curriculum Expectations, 1998). These revised standards have been the result of a perception that Ontario's students have been falling behind the academic abilities of their peers in other countries (Brown, 2000). Teachers have focused their pedagogy into the defined curriculum content topics and benchmark expectations of this new curriculum. Standardized testing (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2005) has also had a significant impact on a heightened level of accountability within the school. Given this context, this research study aims to determine how teachers view referral reasons for special education services.

Interpreting the Data

Qualitative research methods were used in this study of how students come to be referred for special education services. Semi-structured, informal interviews with thirteen, purposefully chosen classroom teachers from kindergarten to sixth grade yielded data on how they came to identify a need for a special education referral; participant observation data enriched the description of the resulting themes from the data. All teachers in my school who taught kindergarten to sixth grade were invited and agreed to participate; these grades were chosen because the bulk of referrals typically came from these grade levels. All but three teachers who were interviewed had at least five years in the field and most of the teachers had some experience with the academic curriculum of the school district and delivering it. In their role as classroom teachers, they had come to experience students who have difficulty and,

therefore, show signs of needing referral for special education. An aspect in my being the researcher in this study that facilitated the data collection is the fact that the informants and I had been colleagues for some time. I was their special education consultant teacher in inclusion classrooms. It was routine procedure for them to dialogue student cases with me. We had also participated in a number of professional activities together in terms of school and district committees and professional development activities. They did not feel inhibited in discussing their thinking in terms of referral criteria. This helped make their responses informative relative to the research questions of this study. I met with each informant for a mutually agreed upon 45-60 minute session. The main purpose of the interviews was to generate data relative to the referral reasons for students considered for special education services. Each interview began with a descriptive question: *Could you tell me about your day with your students?* A series of probing questions followed: *Did anyone surprise you with what he/she produced? Did anyone find it difficult? How did you come to notice this? It was interesting to learn how the teacher came to notice students' needing a referral for special education. Indeed, these signs are what trigger students to be put on the road to be assessed either by a medical practitioner or child psychologist. The closing question was: Do you wish to add anything else we may have missed?* This allowed each informant the opportunity to end each interview with closing comments.

I tape recorded and transcribed each interview to have a reliable record of the conversations with the various teachers. After reading the data set several times, I organized the data into topical themes by jotting down notes, using standard word processing software, and keeping a separate running list of major ideas (Guba & Lincoln, 2000; Miller & Crabtree, 2000; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). I completed member checks with informants to validate the verbatim record of the interviews. Pseudonyms were used for place names and people (teachers are coded by their grade level) relative to this study to ensure confidentiality of the informants. After analyzing the data by searching for common concepts and practices, several themes emerged as to why a student would be referred for special education services.

Discussion of Thematically Organized Data Inability to Apply the Presented Information

A prominent theme of needing referral for special education services mentioned by the participants in this study involved their perceptions of students' inability to apply presented information in their work. Students are expected by many teachers to demonstrate presented academic content; it is not so much what students attempt to do that is important but rather what they demonstrate that they can do: *I would like to think there are some areas [in which] he [has] average intelligence but just can't get the work down on paper. We can't mark potential. We have to mark what we see* (fourth grade teacher (a), field notes). This relates to the evolution in the reporting process to parents from a student grade for achievement and effort to only a grade for achievement. With standardized assessments and grade-level expectations, academic performance is the key criteria of success. If a student is to be successful, he/she will need to demonstrate knowledge of presented material. The presumption of outcomes based education is that learning must be documented in prescribed ways so as to prove a student's knowledge to someone else; effort alone is insufficient.

Our educational system has been socially constructed over time to identify certain students with deemed *acceptable* levels of ability to be rewarded and those without the required level of skills to be deemed *deficient* in some way (Fu, 1995). However, acceptable and deficient are relative terms. The learning style format in which the student is to learn has a large influence on the potential for students demonstrating academic success. If a different learning format (e.g., visual instead of auditory) were offered to the student, successful demonstration of knowledge might be better.

Sufficient background experiences of the student can also really facilitate or impede learning and success with assessments. Familiarity with a topic provides the student with terminology and a point of reference which helps the student to understand the new learning tasks in the classroom. Intellectual stimulation is facilitated through out-of-school learning experiences; they really help students to develop personal inquiry skills and interests which complement activities done in the classroom. Students who lack these opportunities and/or abilities arrive at school without the prerequisite skills that schools expect. This construction of the learning environment has been designed for students to succeed in ways that are implied through academic standards, curriculum texts, and standardized tests.

When expected academic performance is not achieved, the student's inability provokes consideration of the next steps in the referral process:

Then I have the one student that probably will be brought to [the in-school special education consultant team]. My expectation for him isn't to complete the activity. I usually let him [do] as much as he can follow along with the regular routine. He won't be able to complete like a phonics page. He just learned how to write his name (kindergarten teacher (c), field notes).

There is an implied relationship here between the expectation as defined by the teacher and the student's demonstrated level of performance. If the expectation of a higher level of achievement were defined for the student, it's possible that the student's products would indicate an increased level of skill.

The component of students' incomplete work can also become the center of discussion: *Incomplete work. Eventually, monitoring the work that [the students] do; and then finally having their tests and [seeing that they did not do] well at all (first grade teacher (a), field notes).* Another teacher made a similar comment: *The fact that they are not processing all of the information that is being given to them. It doesn't show up in their work (kindergarten teacher (a), field notes).* When students are presented with curriculum content and provided time to practice with it, they are to demonstrate that knowledge in curriculum assessments. *[A student] that is frequently getting the wrong answer and sometimes writing down anything. Other times really trying but really isn't grasping the concept that we are working on. Incorrect answers (first grade teacher (b), field notes).* Difficulty in doing this renders the student as needing consideration for a referral for special education services.

A student can be defined as needing referral for special education services because of not indicating a level of understanding with a task: *Another thing is rushing through the task with very little understanding of the task. When [I marked the assignment,] there was very little understanding (second grade teacher, field notes).* Rushing through an activity could indicate a variety of difficulties; the student may not be able to read the directions, retain the practiced concept in long-term memory for a test at the end of a unit of study, or not be able to attend to a task long enough to complete it. *When their feedback comes back, they are not showing understanding. Written assignments are always an indicator (fifth grade teacher, field notes).*

The practice of writing involves a series of techniques and abilities which must come together on demand to complete the task. The student needs to have: knowledge of the topic to formulate ideas; the ability to organize them in a cohesive fashion; the gross and fine motor ability with the arm, hand, and fingers; and the ability to integrate these skills to produce written text. Adaptive technology such as Co: Writer SOLO (Johnson, 2005) or Dragon Naturally Speaking (Nuance, 2005) can greatly assist with production of text, but the student must still generate the ideas and sequencing of the text. Knowledge of the student's strengths and weaknesses in these areas would help inform classroom practices and strategies that help meet the student's needs. With a referral for special education services, an adaptive technology assessment could help inform the classroom teacher of what the student's needs are.

Needing Assistance/Requiring Repetition of Directions or Instructions

A second indicator of the need for referral for special education services was students often asking for assistance and needing repetition of directions. These classroom teachers highlighted the need for students to be able to complete tasks independently. *The student is unable to follow instructions or independence skills in an activity. They cannot do the activity without the teacher working one-to-one with them. Needing clarification from step to step* (kindergarten teacher (d), field notes). *As well, two out of the four of them [referred for special education] are constantly asking questions. It's consistent in all subject areas that they need the extra help* (third grade teacher (b), field notes).

Teachers require students to demonstrate the skills implied in doing a task. *I'm watching to see how they pick up on what I say to them. Is the message going through...? How far/well do they follow through on directions I give them* (fourth grade teacher (b), field notes)? This indicates that the means in working on curriculum expectations is as important as the end product. One teacher highlighted a more obvious student example: *Not being able to understand instructions. Before we sit at circle time before we do an activity, I go through the entire activity and I do it with them. If they are not able to go and do that independently, I just prompt them. They need to be reminded of what to do* (kindergarten teacher (b), field notes). Even the gestures and facial expressions can be indicators of needing referral for special education services. *Another thing I notice is when someone isn't getting what we are doing is a 'blank' look that they get. I know immediately that they do not understand what I am saying* (first grade teacher (b), field notes).

Our educational system has a significant undercurrent of the Socratic Method in its delivery. Teachers give directions and students are expected to respond appropriately. When they do not, this is a sign of needing referral for special education services. The assumption is that students should be able to understand in the context of the teaching method/style we choose. The educational system in its methodological and theoretical expectations has constructed an *expected* manner and rate at which students must demonstrate an ability to achieve the learning outcomes. Those who are unable to do this are labeled as needing referral for special education services.

Inattention

Teachers commented on inattention as a sign of a child possibly needing referral for special education services. They described inattentiveness in the following ways. *[a student who is very distracted, easily distracted, or needs refocusing. This would trigger off that they are not going to be able to finish tasks. Also, because [the students] can't accomplish the task, [this] is why they are distracted—it's both ways--cause or effect* (fourth grade teacher (b), field notes). This teacher saw a connection between inattentiveness and inability. *Not being attentive to what we are doing. [The student may be] ... attentive for a short amount of time, and then because what we are doing is difficult, losing that attentiveness* (first grade teacher (b), field notes). This teacher commented about children who can attend to a task but then lose their ability to focus due to the difficulty in what is expected. This could be connected to the level of difficulty of the curriculum expectations themselves and/or the structured manner of delivery in the classroom.

Other teachers commented on the aspect of students being disengaged from the pace and activity of the classroom. *[A student who is] just sitting there* (third grade teacher (a), field notes). *The first sign would be not able to begin a task immediately* (second grade teacher, field notes). *[A child who lacks] focus and concentration* (kindergarten teacher (a), field notes). *They aren't able to maintain eye contact or they aren't able to sit still or be able to hold their head up* (sixth grade teacher, field notes).

Inattention may be the result of something entirely other than the child (e.g., a student's reaction to food additives). It is possible that learners who are considered for referral for special education services can be constructed by the educational system due to reasons beyond their control.

Inability to Complete Tasks in the Allotted Time

Another sign reported by participants was that of a student's inability to complete tasks in the allotted time as interpreted by the classroom teacher. *[A student] who takes much longer at tasks* (fourth grade teacher (b), field notes). *Inability to carryout [and] complete the activities and tasks* (Kindergarten teacher (a), field notes). Not only is there an expectation of being able to produce a demonstration of knowledge of presented material but also a need for students to do it within timed parameters. When they do not, this is considered a sign of needing referral for special education services. Again, this is part of the construction of the curriculum expectations that provoke the systemic creation of students who are considered for special education referrals.

A first grade teacher (a) commented that not just an incomplete activity of a student but incomplete class activities throughout a unit of study indicated the need for referral: *[The students produce] incomplete work. Eventually, [I monitor] the work that they do; and then finally [I see] their tests and [and that they are] not doing well at all.* This would infer that the student had difficulty with tasks in a variety of learning formats. I worked with students in a first grade teacher's (a) class on a number of occasions; this teacher used music, drama, discussions, art, written and oral language activities and others in presenting information, having students practice a concept, and demonstrate knowledge.

A fourth grade teacher (a) commented that difficulties with components of a task would indicate the need for referral: *[Students may have an] inability to keep up. Multi-step directions are a problem. Always being way behind the others.* This last comment again alludes to the social construction of our education system. The concept of intelligence and success with learning is significantly determined by comparing students relative to their peers.

"Look"/Atypical Behavior

Teachers commented on assessing students' comportment and behavior outside the classroom with peers, adults, and simply the students' *look*. *They seem to have specific needs--speech and language or fine motor--lots of things. By observing them mostly* (third grade teacher (a), field notes).

Sometimes you can tell by looking at a student that they are different than the other students in the class because they are. They shuffle when they walk. Shaking. There's a whole variety of things you can observe. [The student may demonstrate] emotional highs and lows. They are constantly in social conflict with other students. They can't reason what's happening to them (sixth grade teacher, field notes).

This reason for referring a student for special education services indicates a dimension extenuating from demonstration of academic ability. Unlike the previous referral criteria discussed, atypical behavior/look relate to a greater degree of subjectivity in the referral process. In working with this sixth grade teacher for nine years, I can think of students who were referred from her class exhibiting these characteristics.

When students have difficulty with curriculum content, they can easily become discouraged with their chronic academic inability. Dr. Richard Lavoie (F.A.T. City, 1989) discusses the simulation of a student with a learning disability being like a poker player who arrives for a game of poker with no poker chips to play with. Every attempt at academics is a leap of faith due to low self-concept (that a student will not feel motivated to attempt an activity due to failure with past academic activities). This reality for students with disabilities can render them with feelings of success when it happens and despair when they fail. Not doing well with classroom activities may lead them to misbehave in the school yard.

While some students indicate a need for referral over a period of time, this teacher commented that the need for referral can be immediate and obvious:

I guess you flag students whose attitude you spot first. In the first day, there's nothing in the written format, is there? So, he was an easy pick. He had all the trappings of [needing

referral for special education services] by what he didn't do. By what he didn't say, that concerned me (fifth grade teacher, field notes).

Whereas the sixth grade teacher had defined her referral criterion relative to students' demonstrated actions, this fifth grade teacher determines a need for referral based on what is not demonstrated as well. With our socially constructed education system, students need to explicitly demonstrate what they can do; when they do not demonstrate an ability to express themselves in clear sentences, for example, teachers may read this as the student having difficulty with oral language.

This atypical behavior/look referral criterion relates how the system encourages students to be categorized into groups. Through observations, teachers draw conclusions about where students *fit* the mold that has been constructed for demonstrating knowledge. The second grade teacher explained her view:

As educators, we should be able to modify as much as possible, but also utilize the resources and people in our school. I don't really see it being different in the future. Especially with special needs kids who are mainstreamed, the main thing is that they have special needs. They need equipment and activities. Their approach to life is completely different. It is not like the average child (second grade teacher, field notes). Interviewer: How do you see and know that? Second grade teacher, field notes: Oh, you see it. Their behavior, how they talk, how they understand the world around them, how they socialize. You see it in many things that they do. It is many things that they show in the classroom and even at recess time. It's part of their personality.... I think you'll have [students needing referral for special education services] no matter what. When I was growing up, you were considered dumb. Teachers were allowed to call you dumb. You're in the "dumb reading group." You won't amount to much. I think by having teachers not using that kind of language has really pulled us up. Also, the labeling is necessary for certain kids. I think how we label and when we label is important to watch out for. It is not too early, but if there is severe disabilities that the child is experiencing when they are working in a classroom situation, those children should be looked at an earlier stage. Others should be able to let go a little bit longer (second grade teacher, field notes).

Based on teachers' referral criteria, their interpretation and perceptions of a student have a great influence on the interpretation of a student's abilities. These interpretations and perceptions are created within an education system that defines for the student how learning will take place and in what manner the demonstration of knowledge acquired will be determined. When a student does not fit this mold, they become labeled and categorized given their supposed inability to conform to the norms of the classroom. This results in the idea that labeling is necessary in order to help such students who do not conform to the norms.

Referral Criteria for Special Education Services: Lessons Learned

Significance of the Findings

The key referral criteria that these teachers used to identify students needing referral for special education services included a combination of student characteristics that teachers observed (inattention, lack of comprehension, inability to complete tasks in the allotted time, and poor test performance) and what teachers inferred—e.g., about the way a student looks. These were characteristics mentioned often by classroom teachers as being key signs they used to nominate students for special education services. Based on the perspective of the informants, a student who presents himself/herself as different, academically unable, or with atypical comportment to the teacher is interpreted as needing referral for special education services.

The comment about the way a student looks provokes an issue that has been concluded from previous research (Andrews et al., 1997; Jackson, 2001; Mamlin & Harris, 1998). With defined expectations (Curriculum Expectations: Grades 1-8, 1997) for students, teachers may refine their perspective of students based on how they present themselves. However, first

impressions can be very misleading which could result in students being referred even though *hidden* academic ability is present. This highlights the key role classroom teachers have in the referral process.

However, the results of this study contradict much of the previous research (Abidin, 2002; MacMillan, 2001; Jackson, 2001; Mamlin, 1998; Andrews, 1997) about classroom teachers' reasons for referring students for special education services. One of the referral criteria mentioned by participants in this study relate to academic tasks within the context of the classroom. With the focus being placed more and more on curriculum expectations and standardized assessment in schools (Curriculum Expectations, 1998), perhaps academic ability is resulting as a key element in the way teachers' perceive students and, therefore, in how referrals are made.

As a special education teacher at Ridgefield Elementary, I could certainly sense an elevated sense of stress amongst the staff when the new curriculum standards and standardized testing (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2005) began in 1998. At the same time, there was also a sense of confidence with what teachers were doing in terms of curriculum because these curriculum documents (Curriculum Expectations, 1998) stated clearly what was to be taught—and that there was a lot to be covered in the curriculum. This renewed focus on academic ability being the key component of assessment in the report card and with standardized testing results being so prominent for the school's reputation, classroom teachers' focus on academic ability for referral criteria is logical. They would want those students who are not performing well to receive the help that they should have to attain good marks on their report card and standardized tests. Classroom teachers at the school have certainly become more sensitive to academic performance with Ontario's renewed Curriculum Expectations (1998) and standardized assessments (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2005) at the third and sixth grade levels. Having been a teacher at the school previous to their implementation in 1998, I certainly noticed a difference in the pedagogical tone and focus. Each fall, the results of the previous May's results would be released. Thankfully, we always did well. However, teachers became more and more sensitive to accomplishing the curriculum content.

It is interesting that the data did not include any references to parental suggestions for referrals. Having been a teacher at Ridgefield Elementary for eight years, there were cases where the parent did inquire (and in a few cases demanded) special education services. The semi-structured interviews did not provoke this to be mentioned. I think that this could be the case for one of two reasons: first, referrals instigated by parents were rare; second, classroom teachers were hesitant in making a referral that they did not feel justified themselves in making. This exemplified standard procedure for special education referrals at Ridgefield Elementary.

Limitations

Given my role as a special education teacher in the school and as the researcher in this study, my personal attitudes and background as well as those of the informants both work to provoke elements of compromise within the data. Creating a schedule of interview questions, conducting interviews with a group of people and interpreting the data also gives a researcher a significant degree of power over the whole process. As Scott and Usher (1998) observe, *Those who carry out educational research need to realize that they are not engaging in a neutral activity but rather in a politics of knowing and being known where power is never absent*. As a consequence, it is important to view the exercise as objectively as possible when using the data to suggest conclusions—even if they may not have matched the study's hypotheses.

The concept of doing these semi-structured interviews encapsulates theories of communication and social reality (Briggs, 1982). In a manner of speaking, a researcher attempts to create a portrait of *the real world* by playing a dominant interactional role in the

interviews. Through the posed questions, classroom teachers were led away from their own routine thoughts to the issues concerning this study. Therefore, the interviewer needs to consider one's own participation in the discussed issues when analyzing the data. One example would be the discussion with the second grade teacher about her stating the perspective that students with exceptionalities will always exist due to their approach to life being completely different. This was one conversation that I will probably never forget given her articulating the view that students with exceptionalities are a virtual reality for schools; they have needs which command being addressed. My interest in these comments provoked me to extend the discussion. In effect, one must be careful of viewing the collected data as conclusive and final. Also, there is the issue of how one comes to investigate this topic as an educated middle-class person. Briggs (1982) refers to this as scientific colonialism. Addressing this topic from the point of view of a teacher implied an emphasis on the interviewer's perspective as a special education teacher and those of the classroom-teacher informants. It is inevitable that the way in which the research has been conducted and viewed involves contradictions and assumptions that would generate different data with another researcher: *Just as interview techniques contain hidden theoretical and ideological assumptions, they are tied to relationships of power and control* (Briggs, 1982).

Future Research

To expand on the findings of this study, future research should assess a larger sample of teachers. Research investigations could consider the impact that standardized testing itself is having on the referral process. Another means to extend this research would be to compare a typical standardized curriculum classroom setting with a more learning styles educational environment and see to what degree this alternative method might impact on the number of students being seen as needing referral for special education services.

Final Thought

As I reflect on my session with Mark and how he came to be initially referred, assessed, and identified with a disability, I wonder how special education support has impacted his life. Instead of being ignored in the classroom, there is awareness of Mark's educational needs. Through accommodations and modifications to curriculum programming, Mark's opportunity for success in his high school program and later occupation are facilitated. That initial referral in first grade by the classroom teacher (and the required special education standardized assessment scores) was that important first step.

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